DIVIDING WALLS
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Psalm 89:1–8
Mark 6:30–34, 53–56
Ephesians 2:11–22

"…he is our peace … and has broken down the dividing wall"
Ephesians 2:14 (NRSV)

"Dear God, the morning paper reminds us that we live in a violent world, and that the human race is tragically divided between nations, political systems, and religious world views. And so we come to you — creator and God of all of us — seeking your peace, holding tightly to your promises, your dream of a world at peace — where the dividing walls are gone and no one is a stranger. In these moments together, startle us again with your love in Christ, poured out for each and every one of us, your children. Amen."

"He is our peace … and has broken down the dividing wall…"

Robert Frost wrote a lovely poem about a wall once. Now, it is a fundamental rule of preaching to never, ever, read a long poem in the middle of a sermon. Bear with me. This is, I think, a particularly good one. Frost called it "Mending Wall" and I can't be sure, but I'll bet Robert Frost was thinking about what another man of letters, Paul, wrote about walls 2,000 years earlier. It's about two neighbors, meeting one day in the springtime and walking together on either side of the wall, made of field stones, that separates their two farms, repairing the wall as they go, replacing the stones that had fallen out during the winter. His neighbor loves the wall, appreciates the wall — "Good fences make good neighbors," he says, twice. The poet, on the other hand, has an alternate vision.

> "Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
> That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
> And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
> And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
> …
> The gaps I mean,
> No one has seen them made or heard them made,
> But at spring mending-time we find them there.
> I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
> And on a day we meet to walk the line
> And set the wall between us once again.

We keep the wall between us as we go….
We wear our fingers rough with handling them….
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors'.
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows?
But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.'…
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall” the great American poet said, knowing full well that it’s not necessarily true; that, like his neighbor, there is something in us, perhaps all of us, that loves the walls we build — for protection, security, to keep out undesirables and those who threaten us. There is something, one could argue, inherently human that loves walls and builds walls, and tenaciously resists the idea of life without walls. Walls define us, and help us establish who we are and aspire to be, over against those on the other side of the wall.

And sometimes walls are huge — walls of custom and culture, walls of race and ethnicity, walls of religion, walls built on centuries of hostility and hatred . . India – Pakistan, North and South Korea, whose 155 mile demilitarized zone still separates the Korean people. An item in the New York Times this morning describes how that particular dividing line, built 50 years ago next Sunday, has become a safe sanctuary for hundreds of rare and endangered species of animals and plants — a lovely twist that must make God smile. Israel/Palestine — where the Israelis are, in fact, building a huge wall; Northern Ireland. And lurking just beneath the surface of many of the walls that divide the human race is religion.

One of the most influential books of our time is Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington’s The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order. Huntington argues that the major fault lines and potentially dangerous conflicts in the future will emerge at the intersection of the world’s major civilizations. Different cultures have competing visions of the world and are

destined to clash. Huntington identifies four major civilizations that will compete and fight for dominance: Judeo-Christian, Eastern Orthodox, Islamic, and Confucian, each defined by a religion. Huntington's advice is that America and Europe need to get together and prepare to do battle with the other three. (See Charles Kupchan, The End of the American Era, p.43-49)

Religion can be a very real wall. The story was told in my home about my maternal grandfather, a successful Scots-Irish businessman who ultimately lost everything he had. He was a prominent layman in the Second Presbyterian Church and a great friend of its pastor. It was his custom on Sunday after the evening service to invite the minister, and a Catholic priest, and a Rabbi to his home for a glass of whiskey and a gentlemanly conversation. He had one rule — no talking about religion or politics.

I grew up in the context of religious diversity and latent conflict. My chums with whom I played daily were the devoutly and strictly Baptist Esteps who went to church a lot, didn't smoke, drink, or read the funny papers on Sunday and the devoutly Roman Catholic Shaugnessys who went to confession on Friday and came home to eat fish and whose oldest sibling was a nun, Sister Hilda. We were Presbyterians — my parents pretty much did all the things the Esteps thought were sinful — but were profoundly horrified when I went to confession with my friend John Shaugnessy and stood outside the little booth while he talked to the priest. My parents treated it like a major crisis and I was told never, never to do that again. The Esteps and Shaugnessys argued about religion and church a lot — and each was so very certain that theirs was the right and only way. About the only thing they ever agreed on was that the Presbyterian Buchanans were going straight to hell.

I never did buy it — that absolute certainty and the exclusivism that went with it. And I am saddened and appalled at the prominence and popularity of exclusivist religious thinking that specializes in wall building and excluding the stranger, the alien.

Richard Fenn teaches at Princeton Theological Seminary and has done a major study of modern Christian apocalypticisms — such as the phenomenally successful Left Behind series of books. He writes "Some Christian scenarios view the end as a time when there will be no surviving rivals to one's faith: no non-Christians, no infidels." And then Professor Fenn focuses: "Pat Robertson foresees a cosmic battle … when the battle is over, the only people left standing will be those whose thoughts, words and deeds conform to what Robertson has in mind. Even those Jews who do survive Armageddon will have to become Christians. Robertson's God will be all in all." (See CONTEXT, 7/15/03)

Professor Fenn observes “that there is nothing inherently Christian or Jewish or Muslim about any of this apocalyptic conflict. Religious leaders from all three traditions,” he says, “need to disavow the notion that a final orgy of violence will liberate the faithful.”

It comes as news to many but there is an alternate vision in the Bible. It doesn’t get nearly as much press and is not nearly as popular because, well, we love our walls. We are better at wall building than wall breaching — or wall removing. It’s there early in the tradition. The 89th Psalm which we read together:

> “I will sing of your steadfast love,
> O Lord, forever …
> For who in the skies can be
> compared to the Lord?”

Over against the theme of covenant with a chosen people is another theme that whispers about the universality of God’s love, God’s inclusive love for all people and Israel’s chosenness, not as a privilege but a duty to be a light to the gentiles. Over against the theme of a narrowly defined religious purity in the Book of Leviticus — which defines, in fine detail, who is in and who is out, who is clean and holy and who is unclean and profane: over against that is a world view in the prophet Isaiah for instance which sees God’s activity in the world in global terms and specifically includes in the purview of God’s grace those who are specifically shut out in Leviticus… foreigners and Eunuchs. (See Isaiah 56:1-8)

But perhaps the most eloquent spokesperson for a broad, open theology of God’s inclusive love is none other than the man who began his journey at the opposite end of the theological spectrum, the Apostle Paul. Paul was an expert in religious exclusivism and triumphalism. He was a Jew, a Pharisee in fact, an expert in keeping and interpreting the law of Moses. He was so zealous in his faith that he attacked and hounded and persecuted the followers of Jesus. In fact, he was on his way to Damascus to root out Christians and have them imprisoned when he was knocked off his horse and blinded and turned around by God, a remarkable conversion if there ever was one. And then, the scholars tell us, he began a theological journey from narrow exclusivism to a broad, open, grace filled theology of the cross, which finally concluded, amazingly, that God’s purpose in Jesus Christ is as big as the world itself. God sent Jesus, not just to save a few fortunate ones who happened to be lucky enough to hear the news and believe it, but to heal and restore and redeem the whole creation.

Paul began as a Pharisee — proud of his exclusive ethnic and religious identity, with an enormous wall of tradition and rules and laws and rituals

to protect him from others — and by the time of his death he was saying and writing things like:

> "In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.… He is our peace … he has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."

The biggest dividing wall in his world was religious/ethnic, Jews and Gentiles. His own faith tradition was clear about who was in and who was out. Circumcision was the sign. But there was something about the Gospel of Jesus Christ that wouldn't stay behind that dividing wall. Gentiles kept responding, kept wanting to be numbered in this new thing, this wonderful inclusive new phenomenon that was happening, this new humanity. So Paul, you have to believe — reluctantly, objecting and arguing all the way — finally comes all the way around and concludes that in Christ, God is creating a new humanity, one new humanity, is healing all the wounds, all the violence, and making one new humankind of all those who are separated and divided and at war. It's bold, brave, bracing theology and it is grounded in the cross. That's what the cross is about, Paul teaches: not a narrow symbol of an exclusive religion but in Bishop Tutu's wonderful image, Christ with arms flung wide to gather in and embrace the whole world.

There are serious implications in that. It's not for the meek, for those who need a wall to hide behind. It means coming out from behind the wall actually … a cherished theological wall of exclusivism for instance.

I loved reading an item in Martin Marty's newsletter CONTEXT by Jesuit priest, Richard Lawrence. Lawrence remembers a story his mother told him about the traditional Catholic doctrine of Limbo — Limbo is a kind of special purgatory for unbaptized babies where they repose, not suffering, but not in heaven either — because they aren't baptized. When his mother was in sixth grade in her Baltimore parish she was called on to recite the catechism question and answer about Limbo. She refused. "No, Ma'am, I won't … I don't believe it." "What gives you the right not to believe what's in the catechism?" the teacher asked and she replied, "Well, I wouldn't keep a little baby out of heaven over something it had no control over, and I can't believe that God is any dumber or meaner than me."

That was the end of her religious education, Father Lawrence says, and too bad, because she was a pretty good theologian. Her lifelong litmus test for any religious teaching was two questions:

1. If this were true, what kind of person would God be?

2. How does it match up with the God Jesus teaches us about?

Marty concludes that God certainly is not meaner than Father Lawrence's mother. [CONTEXT, 7/15/03]

So sometimes we have to come out from behind the walls we have built and which are providing us, we think, security and safety and identity, because God calls us out, call us to live in the marvelous freedom of his unconditional love.

The God Jesus taught about doesn't seem to know about boundaries and walls, doesn't seem to exclude anyone from his love and acceptance and grace: sinners, cheaters, prostitutes, children, women, sick, unclean, adulterers — all the ones who live their lives on the other side of the wall of religious exclusivism — find their way into his presence and to a place at his table.

That's what God's up to in the world, St. Paul is saying, creating that stunning new humanity.

In a new book good friend Michael Lindval tells about a friend of his, Fuad Bahnan, an Arab Christian pastor in Beirut after the last Arab-Israeli war. In 1983, Israeli armies drove into Lebanon — and members of the church began to buy all the canned food they could to survive a rumored Israeli siege. That's what happened. West Beirut was totally cut-off. And so the Session of the church met to decide how to distribute the food they had purchased. Two proposals were put on the table. The first was to distribute food to the church members, then other Christians, last – if any was left – to Muslim neighbors. The other proposal was different. First food would be given to Muslim neighbors, then to other Christians, finally — if there was any left over — to church members.

The meeting lasted six hours. "It ended when an older, quiet, much respected Elder, a woman, stood up and said, "If we do not demonstrate the love of Christ in this place, who will?" And so the second motion passed. [The Christian Life, A Geography of God, p. 126)

That's what we're here for, Desmond Tutu said, right in the midst of the struggle to tear down the wall of racism in his country — to be the "word visible" — "an audiovisual for the world" he calls the church … this place where the walls come down and people are accepted and included and loved — in Christ, for who they are.

We all live behind some wall or another I suspect: pride, prejudice, walls of gender or race or nation, walls built on sexual identity, or class, or religion. Walls we have built carefully and lovingly over the years for protection and security. And for some of us, I suspect, the dividing wall has been imposed

on us and for whatever reason we feel like strangers to God, aliens, outsiders because of something we have done or something we can't believe, or who we are and who we aren't and can't be.

And the invitation is to tear it down and to stand up and live in the freedom of God's love in Jesus Christ.

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall" the wise old poet said.

And centuries before that.

"He is our peace — and has broken down the dividing wall."

Thanks be to God.